

Analyses, reflections, and proposals from feminism to the working groups of the second conference of economic degrowth for the ecological sustainability and the social equity¹

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We are aware of the fact that the growth economy has not taken into account the depletion of resources, and that we have been made to believe in a false progress without limits that has given "symbolic" stability to the capitalist system, which we could not question until recently. However, not only environmentalism and degrowth have been criticizing this false believe in a system without limits, which in both cases is mainly based on the exploitation and consumption without consideration of resources, but also feminism. Within feminist thinking a critical analysis has been developed, exposing other unfair processes on which the system has been based and made "symbolically" stable. We are referring to the uncritical absorption of patriarchy, gender role stereotypes and the sexual division of labor, which is closely related to contemporary forms of social structuring, such as the nuclear family, that give rise to specific problems that women continue to suffer to a greater extent.

These unequal gendered forms of organization have not only served as another unsustainable way of maintaining capitalism, but neither have they been taken into account or been critically analyzed by other alternative or anti-capitalistic social and economic models. In many cases they are still not being considered. As the feminist Gayle Rubin already said in a famous article in 1975, "The economic and political analyses are not complete if they do not take into account women, marriage and sexuality"².

3. Economy / 5. Work-sharing

According to Marx's analysis of the surplus-value it is understood as the capitalist's benefit of the labor power of the worker, calculating the difference between the worker's salary and the benefits obtained by the finished product. However, as some important marxists and socialists figures had noted by the beginning of the twentieth century³, and the second

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2 Gayle Rubin, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex" in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. Rayna Reiter (Monthly Review Press, 1975). Reprinted in *Feminism and History*, ed. Joan Wallach Scott (Oxford University Press, 1996): 105-151.

3 During the first period of the Russian Revolution, critiques to family structure and oppressed position of women were well developed and several actions were done in order to modify it, and to emancipate women toward a real equity among human beings. See for example:

- August Bebel (1879), *Woman and Socialism* disposable on line at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/bebel/1879/woman-socialism/index.htm>
- Clara Zetkin, *Lenin on the Women's Question* disposable on line at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/zetkin/1920/lenin/zetkin1.htm>
- Leon Trotsky (1925), "To Build Socialism Means To Emancipate Women and Protect Mothers", at

wave of feminism well developed during the 70's⁴, critics to capitalism often forgot about all the labor power performed during and previous to the process of this worker. The worker just not appears as if by magic, but in order to be able to go to work and perform the work, this person has had to be fed (purchasing and cooking food), living under hygienic conditions (cleaning of the house) and wear properly clean clothes (do the laundry, etc.).

Until recently and even today, it has been the women who have been carrying out this work that has never been considered as such without which the capitalistic system would not be possible. This kind of work, named as "sustainability processes of life", have never been assessed but, paradoxically, are extremely necessary for the functioning of daily life. Within these "sustainability processes of life", the whole spectrum of "reproductive work" and "care" is included: the cleaning of the house and family, the caring of persons dependent on others (children, elderly and people with limited mobility), and we could even include all those situations of everyday care, such as the dedication of time for our loved ones, friends, family, etc.

Regardless of the gradual access for women to culture, to the university and to working life, no changes have been made to this reality. Not only do women work outside the home nowadays, but they still continue doing the work at home. Women perform those invisible tasks, inventing an endless amount of strategies at the expense of their quality of life. The uneven availability of time to devote to paid work in relation to men, is one of the factors (along with sexism that still exists in our cultures) explaining the phenomenon of "female job insecurity"⁵. Women often perform less considered jobs, far away from the positions of power, legitimacy and decision-making; jobs with lower salary (sometimes even though men perform exactly the same kind of work), and jobs where they are expected to be more flexible and available regarding working hours and tasks. This situation has a direct impact on women's lack of economic independence and autonomy, and is exacerbated in situations of limited access to education and in the increasingly common situations of single-parent households (single or separated mothers which have the full and sole responsibility of their children). The fact that it is still the women who are in charge of the reproductive work and caring, give rise to a wide range of jobs that fall within the so-called "feminine circle"⁶. If a woman is not able to do the work, her grandmother, aunts or sisters are ready to fill in where she fails. Furthermore, in the case of a good economic situation the work is being outsourced, which is no better than the internal situation: the mercantilization of domestic work and child/elderly care that give rise to new jobs (the nanny, the cleaning lady, etc.) that are not only performed within the feminine circles, but remain precarious (poorly paid, lacking contracts and even without right to social security). Moreover, these jobs are mainly assumed by immigrant women who in turn leave their own families behind in order to take care of families in the Western countries. All this is done in order to send a salary to a country of origin which once again find itself in a precarious situation due to the exploitation and domination of the Western countries. Furthermore it is also important to take into consideration the situation of the people who do not have family or relatives to rely on, or the economic possibility which would allow them to pay for the

Woman and the Family, Pathfinder Press, New York, 1973, selected works.

4 Rubin (1975), *op. cit.*

5 The group "Precarias a la deriva" (among others, but an example of what is being done in Spain) they have been working on the important task of analyzing this phenomenon for a long time. A great part of their work is available on-line: http://www.sindominio.net/karakola/antigua_casa/precarias.htm

6 Amaia Pérez-Orozco, lecture on Degrowth and Feminism, December of 2009 at the "Patio Maravillas", Madrid. Summary of the lecture on-line (in Spanish): <http://decrecimientomadrid.blogspot.com>

tasks that they cannot take care of themselves. Thus, it is this vicious circle that must be broken and it is only possible through structural changes. What the politicians call "reconciliation of work and family life" is not possible, nor can all these unpaid jobs be remunerated, because first of all it wouldn't add up, (in Spain this would mean 9.5 million full-time jobs only counting childcare⁷), and secondly in an egalitarian, degrowth society we have to think about what kind of mercantitized jobs we really want to keep, which we can do without, and which need to be abolished.

11. Reusing empty houses and cohabiting / 4. Private property

So what structure and economic organization that is not based on gender or class (poverty/wealth) inequalities, can properly integrate a sustainable ecological system, taking into account resources as well as sustainability of life. For us it is evident that this unstable system in crisis (however symbolically stable and balanced in our imaginary) has a lot to do with the system of family structure. It is the nuclear family that generates these inequalities, due to its representation of the two stereotypes – that of the "father" and that of the "mother" – isolated and in charge of different tasks. We are talking about a double isolation; each one determined by its traditional role of the binomial man (alone and breadwinner) / woman (alone and in charge of the family care, domestic work and increasingly often she also has to have a paid job), and at the same time, as they are taking part of a small isolated nuclear family, they are isolated from the possibility to share resources and the responsibility of the children and elderly in a more collective manner. We stress the fact that the nuclear family is one of the most important strategies of capitalism for the promotion of private property, individualism and the gendered division of labor⁸, at the same time as it serves as the main promoter of consumerism (the family, the mortgage, the car, the children, the fences, etc.). Other types of organizational models, for example a community-based or co-habitation model or any other family model where there may exist more than two mothers or fathers, could generate an equal and egalitarian distribution of visible and invisible tasks without even thinking about who is doing what. This would help to phase out traditional gender roles (in fact this is already being practiced in communities of young people, but even though these younger generations are less culturally conditioned by patriarchy, it turns out to be very difficult to get rid of these inculcated roles)⁹. Furthermore it would favor a redefinition of private property and the needs for a sustainable life would be completely covered. In the same way that a fairer distribution of resources, where the example of a washing machine for various households is much more sustainable than a washing machine for each and every one, a restructure of the family groups and a redefinition of the emotional bonds would make possible a better management of peoples' resources and time.

29. Education

All of this leads us to the role of education. The education and culture that we have received has disintegrated people into extreme opposites. A person who is treated with

⁷ Amaia Pérez-Orozco, *op. cit.*

⁸ See Cano, Á. (2008) *La liberación de subjetividades y de relaciones entre sujetos a través de mecanismos tecnológicos, culturales y organizativos* at <http://es.blogxpopuli.org/wiki/LSRS>

⁹ The authors discuss their own experiences: the men are still the ones carrying out more handy chores at home, and the women the ones that take care of the cleaning, despite the ongoing struggle to get rid of these roles.

care and sensitivity (girls) at a young age does not grow up at the same way or become like a person who is treated as a strong and resistant person (boys). We know that there are many exceptions and great diversity, but in most cases this is how it works. It is clear that sensitivity is not intrinsic or natural for women, nor is strength intrinsic or natural for men. For a life of degrowth, where collective self-management is fundamental, it is important not to reproduce and repeat these roles. Furthermore it is important that people become strong, independent, empowered and able to perform various tasks including for example to cut firewood, managing an orchard for self-consumption, cleaning, and repair items and structures that are necessary for life. We need a redefined education where the importance lies in knowing how to do the necessary things in life, not the superfluous ones, to motivate active roles of people without gendered division, both in daily activity as well as in political activity, (real involvement in a real democracy) in order to create citizens who are responsible, active and critical of their environment.

20. Demography and Degrowth / 29. Education

When we talk about education we also talk about the right and access to information and the development of a critical capacity necessary for decision-making. In a degrowth society concerned about the current demographic situation it is important to take measures to ensure a good education and sexual and reproductive health systems where empowered women have the possibility to decide how many children they want to bring to the world. These systems must provide, first of all, a good sexual education, followed by free access to contraceptives, and finally, the right to freely decide about motherhood through the access to free and legal abortion. We have highlighted before, how the particular situation of women can worsen and become more precarious due to lack of access to these basic rights, not to mention the generalized "feminization of poverty" that the planet is suffering, and even more so the women from countries which have been exploited by the Western world, due to lack of these good sexual and reproductive health systems, as well as the women's cultural ties to the "life sustainability work". Thus, as responses to this current situation of crisis we find it necessary to change family structures, a review of the education and a new type of work-share.

5. Work-sharing

Regarding work, as we said before we may need to reconsider if we really want that all the housework, child care, elderly care etc. should continue being unpaid or not, or rather, be divided equally between all people. With a reduction of the work week to three days it might be possible to have that necessary time needed for a sustainable life, rather than continuing the mercantilization of housework and child/elderly care, where people organized collectively can take care of their loved ones in their surroundings, however not forgetting about the spare-time that is so necessary in order to obtain a desirable quality of life. And of course we should separate the necessary work from the unnecessary, while the money and resources dedicated for absurd armaments and infrastructure should be dedicated to sustainable life solutions. The big question is also: to what extent do we want a state and is that the best way to manage our resources such as taxes, especially considering the abuse of political power (mostly by men) and the fact that there is no real democracy? Don't we believe that more local and collective groups are better systems for resource management?

25. Human nature and degrowth

Finally we review the role of the major disciplines, especially science and medicine, in respect of how human nature is explained. We know that these disciplines are not neutral and that they rather serve the economic benefits than the people. Furthermore, both science and medicine have uncritically accepted many of the patriarchal bases of gender inequality (among others) and above all they have tried to give them a scientific explanation. Thus, it is necessary to bear all of this in mind when we take on the task to reconsider the definitions of human nature, in order not to commit the same old mistakes over again.

A critical degrowth stance to science and medicine should aim at a technologically ethical research and development, as well as a review of the medical and scientific practices that are intervening on human nature in less desirable ways, as they often represent a misuse and administration of these resources of knowledge and techniques. One example is the hyper-medication before and during delivery (the innumerable tests during pregnancy, the planned cesareans and the subsequent problems due to the use of unhealthy techniques that are used for the convenience of the doctor, such as cuts or episiotomy), we are talking about psychological and/or medical interventions (as in the case of transsexuals and intersexual people), we are talking about the medicalization of the problems that we know that most of the times are due to the system and not the people (as for example the enormous subscription of antidepressant pills)¹⁰. Furthermore it is also necessary to focus on prevention (reduce or eliminate pollution, the chemical products in food and cleaning material, the endless amount of working hours and alienating work, etc.).

In short, we have to question the role of science and medicine in imposing the culturally binomials man/nature, man/woman, or the absurd relationship man-culture/woman – nature, and to get rid of them completely.

¹⁰ At Wikipedia you find an interesting project, in which the authors are involved, that aims to look deeper into the social need for democratic participation of scientific technological development from a gender perspective. We refer to the wikiproject "Science, Technology and Gender," found at: http://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikiproyecto:Ciencia,_Tecnología_y_Género , where we invite you to participate (in Spanish).